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Book Review - Porch Lights

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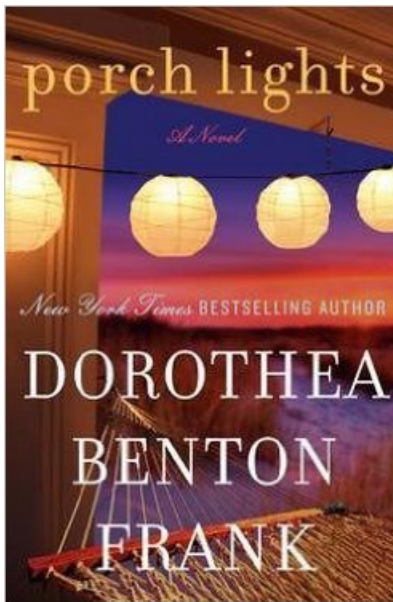
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Off the SHELF

Porch Lights by Dorothea Benton Frank (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2013: ISBN 978-0-0622-1176-7, \$14.99)

The scene is familiar—sandcastles, sweet tea, and affectionately named houses—the formula for literature’s Southern Lowcountry. If it weren’t for the four-legged characters, reading the clichés would have been unbearable. It’s of no consequence to the story though, because Frank’s characterization is what makes *Porch Lights* surprisingly relatable.

When Jackie, an army nurse, suddenly finds herself a widower and a single mother to her ten-year-old son Charlie (her husband Jimmy dies on the job as a NYFD firefighter), she decides to return to her childhood home, The Salty Dog, for the summer. Jackie is independent, reserved, and resilient. She doesn’t openly express much about anything, except in her head, which often leads her to incorrect conclusions. Her restrained relationship with her mother Annie, for example, is based on unwarranted feelings of criticism and dramatics. But as they continue to interact daily, Jackie comes to learn that life endures tragedy, and through witnessing her mother’s behavior, realizes that she herself needs to embrace change in order to heal.



Annie is the principled matriarch, determined to make her daughter and grandson’s visit perfect. She is full of tales about literary history, particularly on Edgar Allen Poe and the infamous pirate Blackbeard, which Charlie relishes. These moments provide interesting exposition to our otherwise methodical setting. Having Jackie and Charlie home, however, brings about an awakening for Annie’s own change and healing. She and her husband Buster have been separated for eleven years now, and her only child lives miles away—Annie can no longer ignore how lonely she feels, despite her efforts to continue daily normalcy.

The story is told in alternating narratives from Jackie and Annie to great effect. The reader quickly understands that mother and daughter are the same. Although predictable, Dorothea Benton Frank’s story line captures familial relationships and beautifully illustrates how we can always find our way home (both literally and proverbially) when someone cares to leave on a (porch) light.

Recommended for public libraries and adult readers.

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